Stoic Ethical Theory: How Much is Enough?

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Abstract: How much theory is enough for a complete account of ancient Stoic ethics and for modern life-guidance? Stoic ethics was presented either purely in its own terms or combined with the idea of human or universal nature (or both). Although the combination of ethical theory with human and universal nature provides the most complete account, each of these modes of presentation was regarded as valid and can provide modern life-guidance.

Keywords: ethics, human, nature, Stoic, worldview.

Introduction

The question posed in my title has two possible meanings. One is: how much Stoic theory do we need to gain the benefits of Stoic life-guidance under modern conditions? The second is: how far do we have to refer to the Stoic worldview to provide an adequate account of Stoic ethical theory? Does Stoic ethical theory need to include reference to the Stoic worldview in order to be complete, and does the ethical theory depend conceptually on this worldview?

This has been a highly controversial question in modern philosophical responses to Stoicism. Lawrence Becker, for instance, assumed that ancient Stoic ethics depended on its worldview and argued that, since we now do not share this worldview, a contemporary version of Stoicism needs to be reconceived and grounded on a credible picture of human, rather than cosmic, nature. His view, that Stoic ethics needs to be reformed in this way has been adopted by other recent writers, including those who are engaged, unlike Becker, in presenting Stoic ethical principles as the basis of life-guidance.[1] On the other hand, Kai Whiting has argued that we have our own, contemporary, reasons for adopting a version of the Stoic worldview as well as Stoic ethical principles. He maintains that the combination of Stoic principles and a Stoic-type worldview can help us to construct a robust ethical basis to support a sense of environmental responsibility and effective environmental action.[2] These discussions have centered on the question how contemporary thinkers should use Stoic ideas for modern purposes. There is a parallel debate among scholars of ancient philosophy about how to reconstruct and interpret the original Stoic view on this question. Some scholars, including A. A. Long, have presented Stoic ethics as grounded, conceptually, on the Stoic worldview. Others, including Julia Annas, have questioned this supposition, and have pointed to evidence that Stoic ethical principles were sometimes

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[1] Becker 2017, 3-6, and ch. 5; Pigliucci 2017, ch. 6; Stankiewicz 2020, x, and 263-271.
[2] Whiting and Konstantakos 2019, 193.

presented independently, without reference to the worldview, or, alternatively, linked with ideas of human nature. This interpretative debate has been quite intense and has given rise to intermediate and nuanced versions of these positions.[3] These two kinds of debate (about the modern uses of Stoic ideas and about the precise character of the ancient Stoic theory) amount to two ways of asking, 'how much is enough,' in the second sense of this question.

Here, I aim to bring closer together these two kinds of dialogue, about the modern significance of Stoic ideas and about the scope and character of ancient Stoic ethical thinking. I also explore the implications of the second question posed (how far does Stoic ethical theory depend on their worldview?) for the first question (how much ethical theory is needed for modern life-guidance?). After preliminary comments on the ancient evidence for Stoic ethics, I give an overview of Stoic ethical ideas. I then turn to the question of the relationship between these ethical ideas and Stoic thinking on nature, in various senses, including their worldview. Subsequently, I discuss the implications of these ancient ideas for the modern use of Stoic ethical thinking, including its use for life-guidance. In these ways, I aim to offer an answer to the question 'how much is enough,' in both the senses outlined here.

1. Core Stoic Ethical Ideas

Before discussing the relationship between Stoic ethical ideas and their thinking on nature, I need to clarify what ethical ideas I have in mind, as I do shortly. However, this raises a preliminary question: what is the ancient evidence for these ideas? Those approaching Stoic ethics for modern purposes, especially for life-guidance, often focus on the writings of the Roman Imperial Stoic thinkers, Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius, which survive largely intact and are readily available in modern translations. However, these thinkers did not aim to present their own independent ideas but to convey, in distinctive ways, the philosophical teachings developed by a series of Hellenistic thinkers, from Zeno onwards. The writings of the Hellenistic Stoics have been largely lost. However, the best guide to their doctrines is usually taken by scholars to be certain ancient summaries, taken together with discussions of their ideas by Cicero, a highly informed thinker and writer, though not a Stoic, and by Seneca. In ethics, the most important works are Cicero's *On Ends* Book Three and two summaries by late writers of handbooks, Diogenes Laertius and Stobaeus, all of which seem to be firmly based on Hellenistic sources. These constitute the primary evidence for Stoic ethics, which can be supplemented by other discussions of Stoic theory by Cicero and Seneca, and also by the more informally presented works of Epictetus and Marcus, in so

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[3] See Long 1996, ch. 6; Annas 1993, ch. 4; Annas 2007, 58-87; Salles 2009, chs. 7-8. For reviews of the debate, see Gill 2006, 145-166; Brüllman 2015; Becker 2017, 75-88.

far as they are consistent with the other evidence.[4] The following outline of Stoic ethical ideas is based on this ancient evidence; the same goes for the subsequent discussion of Stoic ideas about ethics and nature.[5]

The idea seen in antiquity as most characteristic of the Stoic ethical position is that virtue forms the sole basis for happiness. This was, typically, contrasted with the view, derived from Aristotle, that happiness depends on the combination of virtue and what are sometimes called 'bodily and external goods,' such as one's own health and prosperity and that of one's family and friends.[6] This idea, along with the contrast with Aristotelian-type views, is central to Cicero's discussion of Stoic ethics in *On Ends* Book Three, one of the three main ancient summaries of Stoic ethical ideas, and is also accentuated in the other two.[7] This idea goes along with another, which is presented in ancient sources as a fundamental Stoic theme. Things such as health and prosperity, which are presented by Aristotle as 'good things,' alongside virtue, are characterized as 'indifferents' or 'matters of indifference' by the Stoics, when compared with virtue. This does not mean that such things have no value at all. For most Stoics at least, things such as health have a real or 'natural' value and are things that human beings naturally prefer to have rather than not; in their terms, they are 'preferable indifferents,' by contrast with 'dispreferable indifferents' such as one's own illness and poverty and that of one's family and friends. But, if they have positive value, why do they not count as good things, like virtue, and why are they still 'indifferents,' though preferable ones? They are 'indifferents' because they do not *make the difference* between happiness and misery. Happiness and its absence do not depend on whether we have these things or not but on whether we have and exercise the virtues (or not), and whether we 'make good (or bad) use' of these things, as the Stoics put it.[8]

These ideas may seem strange and unconvincing if we assume the standard English meanings of these terms. The virtues are often understood in modern English as *moral* virtues, generally taken to mean virtues which benefit other people and not ourselves. 'Happiness' is often assumed to mean a pleasurable or contented state of mind or mood. Claiming that virtue is the only basis for

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[4] For these primary sources (by Diogenes Laertius, and Stobaeus, thought to be based on Arius Didymus, and Cicero, *On Ends* 3, along with other important sources), presented continuously, see Inwood and Gerson 1997, 190-260; Inwood and Gerson 2008 (= IG in all subsequent notes), 113-205. See also Long and Sedley 1987 (=LS in all subsequent notes), sections 56-67. For discussion of these sources, see Schofield 2003, 233-256.

[5] For other overviews of Stoic ethical ideas, see Inwood and Donini 1999, 675-738; Sellars 2006, 107-134. See also Annas 1993, discussing Stoic ideas under different headings, e.g. "The Virtues", "Happiness".

[6] See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1.7-10.

[7] For translations of Cicero, *On Ends* 3, see (incomplete) IG, 151-161; also Cicero, *On Moral Ends*, trans. Annas and Woolf 2001. On the debate between Stoic and Aristotelian-type theories, e.g. that of Antiochus, see Annas 1993, 388-425; Russell 2012, chs. 5, 8.

[8] For primary sources on these topics, see LS 58 esp. 58 A-B, 61, esp. 61 A, 63, esp. 63 A. See also Vogt 2017, 183-199.

happiness, with these meanings in mind, seems strained and implausible.[9] However, the Stoics define these ideas differently, in a way that makes their claim much more intelligible, though it remains challenging. The virtues are described as forms of knowledge or expertise; the four cardinal virtues (wisdom, courage, justice, and moderation or self-control), with their subdivisions, are seen as mapping the four main areas of human experience. The virtues, then, constitute forms of knowledge or skill in leading a good human life, one that benefits both oneself and the other people affected by one's life.[10] They are also, for the same reason, forms of expertise in living happily. Happiness is not conceived as a (long-term or short-term) mood or state of mind, though it carries with it a certain state of mind, marked by stability and equanimity. Happiness is seen as a form of life; the standard Stoic definitions of happiness include 'the life according to virtue' and 'the life according to nature.'[11] What sort of life constitutes happiness? It is characterized in various ways. These include a good human life, one that benefits both us and others affected by our life; and this characterization helps to show why the Stoics claim that virtue is the sole basis for happiness. Both happiness and virtue are also characterized in terms that bring out their essential similarity. The virtues enable human beings to live a life marked by a combination of rationality and sociability; and this kind of life is also seen as a happy human life.[12] The virtues are seen as constituting the best way to care for ourselves and others of our kind (other human beings); they are also conceived as constituting a form of internal structure, order, and wholeness. These same qualities are also seen as characteristic of a happy life.[13] Hence, although virtue and happiness constitute different types of entity (a form of knowledge on the one hand, and a form of life on the other), their fundamental character is the same. This helps to explain the otherwise surprising claim that virtue forms the sole basis for happiness. Virtue is a form of expertise that 'makes good use' of whatever 'indifferents' are available; and so happiness does not depend on the presence of specific 'preferable indifferents,' such as one's own health and prosperity and that of one's family and friends.[14]

These two distinctive Stoic ideas (about the relation between virtue and happiness and virtue and indifferents) are presented as core features of Stoic ethics in the ancient summaries and other writings. They are generally combined with two other distinctive Stoic ideas, about ethical development and about emotions. Stoic thinking about ethical development forms part of a broader theory

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[9] On the contrast between ancient and modern ideas of happiness, see Russell 2012, part 1.
[10] See LS 61 A, C-D, H; also Stobaeus 5b5 (IG, 127).
[11] See LS 63 A-B.
[12] See Stobaeus 5b1, 5b3, 6, 6e: see IG, 125-126, 132-133.
[13] For the idea of virtue and happiness as structure, order, and wholeness, see Diogenes Laertius 7.90, 100, Stobaeus 5b8, 5l, 11a (IG, 114, 116-117, 128, 140); Cicero *On Ends* 3.21, Cicero *On Duties* 1.98, Seneca, Letters 120.11; also Long 1996, ch. 9; Gill 2006, 150-157.
[14] See LS 58 A-B.

of animal and human development, which is characterized as 'appropriation' (*oikeiōsis*).[15] The Stoics believe that the capacity to develop towards virtue and happiness is a natural one, in-built in all human beings, [16] and that this development can take place in any social and political context. However, they think that there are certain causes of corruption which are also in-built in human life and are reinforced by social influences; and this explains why so few people, as the Stoics believe, achieve complete virtue or 'wisdom.'[17] Hence, for the vast majority of people, the best that can be achieved is what they call 'making progress' towards virtue and happiness, a process that is ongoing and life-long.[18] Ethical development, in their view, has two main strands. One strand consists in working towards virtue and happiness, through an activity that forms part of any human life, namely 'selecting' between 'indifferents,' that is, things such as health and prosperity. The outcome of this strand consists in understanding fully the substantive difference in value between virtue and indifferents. It also consists in developing and exercising virtue, in part by selecting correctly between indifferents, and thus achieving the happy life (the 'life according to virtue'). The second strand also consists in working towards, and achieving, virtue and virtue-based happiness; but its special focus is not selection between indifferents but interpersonal and communal relationships. What is involved here is the development, in adult life, of two kinds of relationship, that is, with specific people and communities (one's family or friends, and one's own city or nation) and with the broader community of humankind. These two strands, while they can be analysed separately, are in practice interdependent and inseparable parts of a full human life.[19]

Stoic thinking on ethical development also underlies their ideas about emotions. They believe that development towards achieving virtue and happiness carries with it a substantive change in the kind of emotions one experiences. They see most human emotions (including fear, anger, intense desire, and grief) as based on mistaken judgements, specifically a certain kind of misjudgement. This is the mistaken belief that preferred indifferents, such as health and prosperity, one's own and that of one's family and friends, constitute what counts as good and determines happiness or its absence. Ethical development, progress towards virtue and happiness, by itself, brings about the removal of these misguided beliefs and emotions. In Stoic terms, it brings about 'absence of passion' (or freedom from misguided emotions); however, this does not mean the absence of all emotional states. Development also brings about 'good emotions' (such as wish, caution and

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[15] See LS 57; also Inwood 1985, ch. 6.

[16] See LS 61 K-L; also Gill 2006, 132-133, 180-182.

[17] See Graver 2007, 149-163.

[18] On progress in Stoic ethics, see Inwood and Donini 1999, 724-735.

[19] On these two strands, see Cicero, *On Ends* 3.16-22, 3.62-68; also LS 59 D, 57 F; on the two strands seen as integrated, see Cicero *On Duties* 1.11-15. On the first strand, see Gill 2006, 145-166; on the second, social, strand, see Schofield 1995, 195-205; Reydams-Schils 2005, ch. 2.

joy), which are fully compatible with, and depend on, the kind of knowledge or expertise in living which is constituted by virtue. These emotions differ from 'passions' in their subjective effect on the person experiencing them; typically, they are not intense, overwhelming, disturbing or internally conflicted, as misguided emotions sometimes are. However, the most important difference consists in the belief-content, which reflects in turn the extent to which the person involved has or has not achieved virtue and happiness.[20]

2. And What about Nature?

I turn now to the question of the relationship between these core ethical ideas and the Stoic conception of nature, focusing, in the first instance, on the three main summaries of ethical doctrine. The first point to make is that, in these sources and others, Stoic ethics is presented in three different ways. Throughout most of the summaries, these ethical ideas are presented without much explicit reference to nature. When the ethical claims are argued for (such as the idea that happiness is based solely on virtue, or that things such as health are only 'preferred indifferents'), this is, often, without any reference to ideas about nature. However, all three summaries also incorporate some reference to nature, with variations in the extent to which the reference is explicit or implicit and is integrated or not integrated with the account of the ethical ideas.[21]

For instance, the summary in Stobaeus refers, consistently, only to human nature, in this connection, and makes virtually no reference to universal or cosmic nature.[22] One idea stressed is that human nature is, constitutively, rational and sociable; and this underlies the comments on natural human motives, on virtue, and on happiness. The virtues are presented as forms of knowledge of how to live rationally and sociably, and happiness is defined as a life 'according to nature,' meaning according to human nature. This passage is typical: "Since a human being is a rational, mortal animal, sociable by nature, [the Stoics] say that all human virtue and happiness constitute a life which is consistent and in agreement with nature."[23] This linkage between the characterization of virtue and happiness is, by implication, used to support one of the distinctive claims of Stoic ethics, namely that virtue is the sole basis of happiness. This claim depends partly on the

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[20] For primary sources, see LS 65 A-J; also Inwood 1985, ch. 5; Brennan 2003, 269-274; Graver 2007, chs. 2, 7-8.

[21] On primary sources for Stoic ethics, including the three summaries, see text to n. 4; on variations within Stoic thinking on this subject, see Annas 2007, 84-87; also Inwood 2009, 201-207.

[22] Contrast Stobaeus 6a, e (IG, 132-133, LS 63 A-B) with Diogenes Laertius 7.88-9 (IG, 114, LS 63 C) in this respect; Stobaeus 6a contains just one brief reference to universal nature. Stobaeus' summary is thought to be based on Arius Didymus, and through him, Chrysippus (Schofield 2003, 236).

[23] Stobaeus 6 (IG, 132).

distinction between virtue and indifferents, discussed earlier.[24] But it is further supported by the presentation of virtue and happiness as sharing the same, essential, character: both, in different ways, express human nature, conceived as a combination of rationality and sociability. [25] Virtue does so as a form of knowledge and happiness does so as a form of life.[26] The Stoic philosophical move made here, of analysing ethics as, distinctively, *human* ethics can be paralleled in Aristotle, and also in some modern forms of virtue ethics, those of Rosalind Hursthouse and Philippa Foot. Interestingly, all these (ancient and modern) versions of ethics assume a rather similar conception of human nature, namely as a combination of rationality and sociability.[27] Hence, the appearance of the idea of nature, in the sense of human nature, in this summary of Stoic ethics, is readily intelligible from a philosophical standpoint.

This point, taken on its own, is relatively straightforward. Stoic thinking on the ethical significance of universal or cosmic nature is more complex and raises various kinds of questions. I begin by highlighting the main connections between the Stoic worldview and ethical doctrines, and then considering how these connections are understood in Stoic thinking. The most relevant Stoic account of their worldview comes in their theology, which falls (rather strangely from a modern standpoint) within 'physics' or philosophy of nature, conveyed in works such as Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods* Book Two.[28] What is offered in such writings is a highly 'ethicized' account of nature, designed to show that the world and the universe as a whole are good.[29] Two main grounds are given for the goodness of the universe (and world). One is that the universe is characterized by rationality; and its rationality is demonstrated by the presence of structure, order, and wholeness. The regular pattern of movement of the planets in (what we call) the solar system is taken as the most obvious indicator, along with other such regular patterns (night and day, the seasons and so on) in the world.[30] The second salient feature is the providential care of the universe, and its in-built divinity, for all elements in the universe and the world. Within the world, although human beings, as constitutively rational animals, are special recipients of providential care, this care is also extended to all aspects of the natural world, including living

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[24] See text to nn. 7-8.

[25] For this set of ideas, see Stobaeus 5b1, 5b3, 5b5, 6, 6e (IG, 125-127, 132-133).

[26] For the contrast, see Stobaeus 5b5, 6a (IG, 127, 132).

[27] See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.7; also Hursthouse 1999, chs. 9-10; Foot 2001.

[28] For translation, see Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods*, trans. Walsh 1997. See also a selection of texts in LS 54.

[29] See Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* (hereafter *NG*), 2.37-39, Diogenes Laertius 7.147 (LS 54 A); also Mansfeld 1999, 458-460.

[30] See Cicero NG 2.15, 2.43, 2.49-59, 2.154-156.

things and other natural entities, such as sea and air, which are seen as making up a cohesive whole, which has its own inherent goodness.[31]

The most obvious point of connection between this worldview and ethics comes in accounts of development, conceived as 'appropriation' (*oikeiōsis*). In Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods* Book Two, nature's providential care is presented as indicated by the fact that animals, including human beings, have the bodily equipment and instinctive motives to maintain life and take care of themselves and also to procreate and care for their offspring. In effect, animals 'internalize' in this way the providential care of universal nature.[32] A similar point is made in Stoic writings on development, which fall within ethical theory: animals are presented as appropriating themselves, by maintaining life, and appropriating others of their kind, by procreating, in a way that reflects nature's appropriation of the animals themselves.[33] In other words, in animals, including human beings, the motives of care for oneself and care for others of one's kind are presented as a reflection of broader natural patterns in the world and universe that express goodness.

A second point of connection is this. In a well-known ancient quotation from the Stoic thinker Chrysippus, virtue and happiness at the human level are presented as 'harmonizing' oneself with the reason and order in-built in the universe, a passage cited early in Diogenes Laertius' summary of Stoic ethics.[34] The exact significance of this passage is not spelled out and has been variously interpreted by scholars. However, one possible meaning of the passage is that virtue and happiness, at the human level, correspond to the features taken as expressing goodness in nature as a whole.[35] These features are rationality, as shown in the structure, order, and wholeness of the universe and world, and providential care for all the elements in the universe. In Stoic ethical writings virtue and happiness are repeatedly associated with the qualities of structure, order, and wholeness. In the theory of development, the emergence of virtue and happiness is sometimes characterized in this way; also human development is presented as the realization, in a rational form, of the in-built animal motives of

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[31] On providential care for all aspects of nature, see Cicero, *NG* 2.73-153, including plants (2.83), sea and air (100-101); on special care for human beings as rational animals, see 2.154-168, especially 2.154, also 2.133. See Frede 2002, 85-117.

[32] Cicero *NG* 2.120-4, 128-129.

[33] See Diogenes Laertius 7.85 (LS 57 A(2)); Cicero, *On Ends* 3.62; on these two in-built animal motives underlying 'appropriation', see also LS 57 A-F. See also Schofield 1995, 193-199, and Klein 2016.

[34] "The virtue of the happy person and his good flow of life are just this: always doing everything on the basis of the harmony of each person's guardian spirit [= his mind] with the will of the administrator of the whole [= Zeus or the divinity in-built into universal nature]", Diogenes Laertius 7.88 (LS 63 C(4)), LS trans. modified.

[35] Chrysippus defined happiness as 'the life according to nature' in the sense of both human and universal nature: Diogenes Laertius 7.89 (LS 63 C(5)).

care for oneself and for others of one's kind.[36] These are all features that help to make sense of the idea expressed in Chrysippus' statement that human virtue and happiness correspond, at the human level, to the best qualities of nature as a whole. This is a second connection between ethical theory and the Stoic worldview.

How did the ancient Stoics themselves conceptualize these connections? Two main types of analysis are offered in our sources. One line of thought is that core principles of ethics are, in some sense, explained by key features of the worldview; a recurrent idea is that universal nature forms the 'starting-point' (*archē*) for making sense of Stoic thinking on what is good and bad or on virtue and happiness. This statement in Cicero's *On Ends* 3 is typical:

> The starting-point for anyone who is to live in accordance with nature [that is, to achieve happiness] is the universe and its government. Moreover, one cannot make correct judgements about good and evil unless one understands the whole system of nature and indeed the life of the gods, as well as the question whether human nature matches universal nature.[37]

Comments of this kind seem to present accounts of the worldview (falling within Stoic physics or theology) as authoritative for ethics or as conceptually prior to, or more fundamental than, ethics.[38] However, this idea seems to conflict with the way in which the branches of philosophical knowledge are generally understood in Stoicism. The Stoics, while subdividing philosophical knowledge into logic (or dialectic), ethics, and physics (or philosophy of nature), also stress that, ideally, these branches of knowledge should be seen as making up an organic unity. There is no indication that any one branch is epistemologically superior to any other or authoritative over it.[39] The implication is, rather, that the relationship between them is a reciprocal or equal one. Which of these two lines of explanation fit better with the way the connections between the Stoic worldview and ethics are presented in the ancient sources? Also, how far are these competing ways of analysing the relationship between branches of knowledge consistent with each other?

If we examine closely the way in which the main relevant ideas are presented in Stoic ethics and theology, I think the reciprocal model emerges as more appropriate than a hierarchical or foundationalist one. Although the quotation from Chrysippus (about happiness and universal nature) appears early in the ethical summary of Diogenes Laertius, this idea is not worked out systematically throughout the rest of the summary. In fact, in this summary as well as the other two, the core ethical principles are analysed largely in their own terms; they are, certainly, not shown as derived from ideas about universal nature in the

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[36] See references in nn. 13, 31-33.
[37] Cicero, *On Ends*, 3.73 (trans. Annas and Woolf 2001). See also LS 60 A.
[38] For this view, see Long 1996, 145-151; also Striker 1996, 228-231.
[39] See LS 26 A-E; also Annas 2007, 58-63.

way that the Ciceronian statement, and some others, might lead us to expect.[40] Also, as noted earlier, in Stobaeus' summary universal nature, by contrast with human, barely appears at all.[41] We should not be misled by the reference to theology and divine providence into supposing that Stoicism resembles Judaeo-Christian thinking in this respect, in which God serves both as a transcendental creator of the world (and universe) and as the ultimate source of moral principles, sometimes framed as laws.[42] There is also a contrast with certain modern moral theories, such as Kantian deontology and Utilitarianism, in which moral rules are presented as based on, or derived from, foundational principles (the Categorical Imperative or the Greatest Happiness of the Greatest Number).[43] Also, if we look at the Stoic characterization of theology, what is striking is the extent to which the central claim (that the natural universe and its in-built divinity are good) presupposes a pre-existing understanding of the ethical notion of goodness. Similarly, and in a further contrast with Judaeo-Christian thought, the goodness of God or the universe is not assumed or postulated, but needs to be argued for, using criteria that apply also to goodness in human beings.[44] In this respect, just as Stoic ethics is informed by Stoic physics or worldview, so Stoic physics or at least theology (a subdivision of physics) is informed by Stoic ethics.[45] In these respects the presentation of the points of connection between these two branches of knowledge supports the reciprocal model rather than a hierarchical one or foundationalist one.[46]

This conclusion raises the further question: why is the Stoic worldview sometimes presented as foundational (or, at least, as a 'starting-point') for ethics, as in the Ciceronian passage cited earlier.[47] Of course, given the incomplete and indirect nature of our evidence for Stoic philosophy, not all such questions can be answered.[48] However, we can see that such comments (and also the prominent reference to universal nature at the start of Diogenes Laertius' summary) can serve a useful conceptual purpose, though not, I think, that of showing that the Stoic worldview forms the basis for Stoic ethics. Such comments underline that,

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[40] See Diogenes Laertius 7.88; also 7.90-91, which reviews the core ethical ideas (discussed here in text to nn. 6-20) without mentioning universal nature again.

[41] See text to n. 22.

[42] For Judaeo-Christian, God-given laws, see Exodus 20 (the Ten Commandments), Matthew 22: 35-40 (Jesus' commandments). The Stoic idea of 'natural law' is quite different from these laws and is not directly linked with the divinity in-built in universal nature.

[43] On the contrast between ancient ethics and modern moral theories in this respect, see Annas 1993, ch. 22; on modern principles of this kind, see Korsgaard 1996, chs. 1-4.

[44] See text to nn. 29-31; also Brüllmann 2015, 115-117.

[45] In LS 26 C, theology is presented as the final part of physics and as preceded by study of logic and ethics.

[46] See also Gill 2006, 162-166, supporting the reciprocal view of the relationship between the branches of knowledge.

[47] See text to n. 37.

[48] See text to n. 4.

for Stoicism, it is not only the concept of human nature that is ethically significant, but also that of universal nature. On this point Stoicism seems closer to Plato, at least in the *Timaeus*, a text which seems to have been an important prototype for Stoic thinking in this respect, than to Aristotle, who stresses the ethical significance of human nature.[49] In other words, for Stoicism ethics should not just be seen as *human* ethics (though it is partly that, as Stobaeus' summary shows); it is also human ethics viewed in the context of nature as a whole.[50] The connections between ethics and worldview are worked out from ethical and theological standpoints, and both are weighted equally without either standpoint being seen as authoritative for the other.

3. Modern Responses to Stoic Thinking on Ethics and Worldview

I return to the question posed at the start, about how much is enough for contemporary versions of Stoicism and how far we moderns can accept the Stoic position on the relationship between ethics and worldview. I focus initially on the second version of this question: does Stoic ethical theory need to include reference to the Stoic worldview in order to be complete? Subsequently, I refer to the first version of this question: how much Stoic theory do we need to gain the benefits offered by Stoicism as life-guidance?

I noted earlier that Becker and some other contemporary thinkers argue that, if we adopt Stoicism now, we should do so in a reformed way that excludes reference to the Stoic worldview, though it can and should refer to human nature.[51] It is worth highlighting, first, that in doing so, they are adopting one of the ways that ancient Stoicism was, in fact, presented, as we can tell from Stobaeus' summary of Stoic ethics, which also matches the approach in Cicero's *On Duties*.[52] In this respect, their version of Stoicism is not reframed, but simply one that selects one of the ancient options. A second point arises in connection with universal or cosmic nature. Becker, at least, assumes not only that ancient Stoic ethical theory refers to the Stoic worldview; he also assumes that the core principles of Stoic ethics were seen in antiquity as depending on, or derived from, the distinctive features of the Stoic worldview.[53] However, I have just argued that this is a less plausible way to interpret Stoic thinking on ethics and worldview. Ancient Stoic thinkers saw significant connections between ethics and worldview

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[49] On Aristotle and human nature, see *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.7; on Plato's *Timaeus* as an influential text for the Stoics, see Gill 2006, 16-20.

[50] Chrysippus combines reference to human and universal nature in his definition of happiness (Diogenes Laertius 7.89, LS 63 C (5)); he seems also to have provided the basis for Stobaeus' summary of Stoic ethics; see Long 1996, 130; also Schofield 2003, 236. So this combination of human and universal nature may be characteristic of Chrysippus, the major theorist of Stoic philosophy.

[51] See text to n. 1.

[52] Compare Stobaeus 5b3 (IG, 126) and Cicero, *On Duties* 1.11-15; also text to n. 61.

[53] This is implicit in Becker 2017, 5-6.

and regarded theology and ethical theory as mutually informing. But they did not see ethics as grounded in physics in the way that some contemporary thinkers find conceptually unacceptable. Of course, contemporary thinkers may object not only to Stoic thinking about the relationship between ethics and worldview but also to the Stoic worldview and the Stoic conception of human nature. These objections raise further and more complex questions, which are not taken up here. However, my discussion may defuse a concern about the ancient Stoic understanding of the relationship between ethics and worldview.

My discussion of ancient Stoic thinking on this topic is also relevant for the use of Stoic ideas to support contemporary environmental ethics. Whiting has argued that the Stoic approach to ethics is particularly helpful for contemporary environmental ethics precisely because ancient Stoic ethics recognized significant connections between ethics and the natural world.[54] I agree with this view, though I would also stress that our use of Stoic ideas for this purpose must be a selective one; there are certain Stoic ideas, notably about relations between human beings and other animals, that we would not want to adopt from the standpoint of environmental responsibility.[55] I think the idea that the world constitutes a type of natural structure, order, and wholeness has a special relevance and force in supporting current efforts to address climate breakdown. This breakdown is an index of natural *disorder*, and as such it is a condition we have powerful reasons to prevent or modify. Further, this disorder is primarily a product of human action, thus strengthening the ethical grounds for prioritizing environmental action. To this extent, reference to the Stoic worldview can have a positive moral benefit today. Also potentially relevant is the linkage made by the Stoics between order at the level of universal nature and order at the human level, where it is identified with virtue and happiness.[56] Arguably, in our current situation, we cannot achieve internal order (virtue and happiness) unless we act in a way that promotes environmental order. From this point of view, the Stoic connection between worldview and ethics is a positive feature and one we have reason to adopt, rather than a conceptual obstacle to contemporary versions of Stoicism. In arguing for this view, we do not need to assume that, according to the ancient Stoics, the worldview provides the fundamental ground for ethics. We need only adopt the interpretation recommended here that, according to the ancient Stoics, accounts of ethics and worldview are mutually supporting.

I turn now to the first version of the question posed earlier: 'how much (theory) is enough' to form the basis for life-guidance that provides the benefits offered by Stoicism? Of course, the answer depends on how far the person concerned is prepared to go in her exploration of Stoic thought and, thus, on the

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[54] See text to n. 2. See also Stephens 1994.

[55] There are some markedly anthropocentric features in the Stoic view of relationships between human beings and other animals: see Cicero, *NG* 2.158-61, *On Ends* 3.67. This point is developed in ch. 7 of the forthcoming book cited in n. 77.

[56] On order in universal nature and in human virtue, see text to nn. 13, 30.

kind of benefit she can reasonably expect to gain. However, I focus on the case of someone who aims to take this process as far as can be done, and thus to gain the greatest possible benefit from the process. In this case too, the question arises whether the completion of this process depends on an understanding of the Stoic worldview. In considering this question, I focus on the conceptual underpinnings of a response often seen as typically Stoic in ancient and modern thinking. This is the kind of 'tough-minded' response involved in carrying out a right action or enduring extreme suffering or loss and doing so with equanimity and without experiencing 'passions' such as fear, anger, or resentment. In Stoic ethical thinking, this kind of response is seen as one of the characteristics of fully achieved virtue (or 'wisdom') and virtue-based happiness: hence, in a famous image, the wise person is happy on the 'rack' or torture.[57] The question addressed here is whether this response is conceived as resting, crucially or necessarily, on an understanding of the Stoic worldview or whether it can also be based on other kinds of understanding.

The short answer to the question whether this response necessarily depends on an understanding of the Stoic worldview is 'no.' Ancient writings present this response as based either, purely, on an understanding of core Stoic ethical ideas, or on a combination of those ethical ideas with an understanding of human or universal nature (or both). This point matches the mode of presentation found in the three ancient summaries of core ethical ideas outlined earlier, which are framed either in purely ethical terms or in ethical terms combined with the idea of human or universal nature. Book Five of Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations* provides an illustration of the first type of presentation. The question addressed there is what kind of philosophical framework can best provide the basis for the 'tough-minded' response, especially for enduring disaster or suffering without loss of peace of mind. Cicero's answer is that Stoicism provides the best basis because of its distinctive ethical thesis that happiness depends wholly on virtue, and not (as in theories of an Aristotelian type) on the combination of virtue and bodily and external goods, such as one's own health and prosperity and that of one's family and friends. [58] Cicero's discussion is not framed from a Stoic standpoint but from a non-doctrinaire one (that of Academic Scepticism, which is Cicero's favoured stance).[59] However, the idea that such a response can be based on this core Stoic thesis appears in contexts framed in more orthodox Stoic terms, such as Cicero's *On Ends* 3, and does so without reference to the Stoic worldview.[60]

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[57] See Cicero, *On Ends* 3.42, 5.85: on this type of Stoic image, see Gill 2006, 88-95.

[58] See Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 5.12-14, 21-22, 47, 68-76, 82.

[59] See Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 5.32-3. On Cicero's philosophical stance, see Woolf 2015, chs. 1-2, and on *Tusculans* Book 5, see Woolf 2015, 241-247.

[60] See Cicero, *On Ends* 3.42, linked with the contrast between the Stoic and Aristotelian positions on virtue and happiness, 3.41-44, more broadly 3.30-39; for a similar conjunction of ideas, see Cicero, *On Ends* 5.79-86, especially 5.84.

Cicero's *On Duties*, a work based on a Stoic prototype and on Stoic ideas, is close on this topic to the ethical summary of Stobaeus. The overall approach incorporates a combination of standard Stoic ideas on virtue and indifferents and on human nature, understood as a combination of rationality and sociability. Conspicuously, at certain key points in Books One and Three, Cicero supplements his argument with reference to ideas about human nature, especially those related to sociability and community.[61] Book Three of *On Duties* centers on offering guidance in situations where performing right actions, those in line with the virtues, especially justice, involves giving up what are normally seen as benefits or advantages, that is, in Stoic terms, 'preferred indifferents.'[62] The work concludes with an extended illustration of the 'tough-minded' response, in which the Roman exemplary figure Regulus is presented as doing the right thing, in political and military terms, even though it requires him to leave his family and friends in Rome and go back to torture and death in Carthage. In fact, the justification of his act is couched in terms of virtue (specifically, the virtues of courage or 'greatness of spirit' and justice) and (loss of) advantages, without explicit reference to human nature in support of these ideas.[63] However, the prominence in *On Duties* of the idea of human nature, especially in connection with the virtues and social community, means that this combination of ideas forms part of the background for this climactic example as well as of the framework of guidance throughout Book Three.

The third way of presenting the basis for the Stoic 'tough-minded' response is by reference to the Stoic worldview; and this is a prominent theme in the Roman Imperial Stoic writings of Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus. As already indicated, reference to the Stoic worldview plays several roles in Stoic ethics. Chrysippus uses the idea of 'harmonizing' oneself to universal nature as one way of characterizing virtue and virtue-based happiness;[64] and, accordingly, the idea of 'harmonizing' yourself to nature in this sense is often used as one Stoic way of promoting the aspiration towards virtue and virtue-based happiness. It is also used in connection with the adoption of a tough-minded response to what is normally seen as misfortune or disaster. Marcus uses this idea repeatedly to prepare himself for his own death, sometimes alluding to Chrysippus' famous statement about 'harmonizing' yourself to nature. Here is one such passage:

> What is brought about by the nature of the whole and what maintains that whole is good for each part of nature. Just as the changes in the elements maintain the universe so too do the changes in the compounds [including human beings]. Let

[61] Cicero, *On Duties* 1.11-15, 1.50-59, 1.105-106, 3.21-28, 3.53. On Stobaeus and human nature, see text to nn. 23-25.

[62] Cicero, *On Duties* 3.7-19.

[63] Cicero, *On Duties* 3.99-115, especially 3.99-100, 3.104 on the virtues illustrated.

[64] See text to nn. 34-36.

these things satisfy you; let these be your doctrines ... so that you do not die grumbling on, but positively, genuinely, full-heartedly grateful to the gods.[65]

It is worth noting that for Marcus, as for other Stoic thinkers, reference to universal nature is not the only way of supporting this kind of response; he also cites purely ethical considerations, notably the virtue-indifferents contrast or the idea of human nature as rational and sociable.[66] It is also significant that Epictetus stresses that appeals to the Stoic worldview or to its in-built divinity only have a positive effect if directed at those who are virtuous or at least are progressing in that direction.[67] So we should not suppose that Stoic thinkers believe that reference to universal nature is sufficient by itself to bring about ethical progress. What, then, does reference to the nature of the universe add to these other factors? I think the passage just cited from Marcus gives us an indication, bearing in mind the close association between this theme and accepting one's own death or that of others close to you. In Stoic theology, as outlined earlier, the goodness of the universe, along with its in-built divinity, is seen as manifested in order and regularity, expressed in alternating patterns of day and night, lunar, solar and planetary cycles, and the seasons.[68] As Stoic thinkers point out, the growth and death of living things, including human beings, forms an integral part of this pattern.[69] Hence, Stoics encourage us to view our lives and deaths within this broader framework and in this sense, as well as the others just noted, to see ourselves as aiming to live 'the life according to nature.'

In addition, Stoic thinkers are compatibilists regarding causation. They present the overall course of (determined) events as providentially shaped and, in some sense, working out 'for the best.'[70] Thinkers such as Marcus and Epictetus also present this as a factor which, along with others, can be used to underpin the tough-minded response.[71] Although this idea is a recurrent one in Stoic writings, it is not entirely easy to specify in what sense the course of events does work out for the best in Stoic thought or how this idea is interconnected with other aspects of Stoic ethics. As ancient critics of Stoicism pointed out, there are various features of Stoic thought that suggest that events do *not* generally work out for the best.[72] These feature include the fact that the vast majority of humankind do not develop ethically as they should (towards complete virtue and virtue-based happiness or

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[65] Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 2.3, trans. in Gill (2013); also 2.4, 2.17.4-5, 5.8.9-11. See also Gill (2013, xlix-lii, lxiii-lxvii). On Marcus's view of death and transience see Stephens 2012, 108-150; Sellars 2021, 96-102.

[66] See Marcus, *Meditations* 3.4.7, 3.6, 3.7, 5.1,

[67] Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.2.13-16, 1.27.12-14, 2.22.15-17; on this point, see Brennan 2005, 237-238.

[68] See text to n. 30.

[69] See Marcus, *Meditations* 4.43, 5.4, 5.23, 6.36; Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.24.87, 91-92.

[70] See LS 54 and 62, especially 62 C (on Stoic compatibilism).

[71] See Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.6.9-10; Marcus, *Meditations* 3.4.5, 3.11.4.

[72] For ancient criticisms of Stoic ideas about providence, see Cicero *NG* 3.65-92; for Stoic defences, see LS, vol. 1, pp. 332-333.

'the life according to nature'), a fact seen by Stoics as caused by deep-rooted tendencies in human nature as well as by widespread error in human societies.[73] If we ask what features of their worldview support their belief in the providential working out of events, the most plausible ones, again, are those highlighted earlier on the interface between Stoic theology and ethics. Stoics see universal nature as creating the conditions, broadly speaking, in which the component forms of life within the universe can come into being and flourish, in part through having the instinctive motivation to care for themselves and others of their kind. When combined with the Stoic theory of natural development as appropriation, this implies that human beings, as rational and sociable animals, are naturally capable of developing towards virtue and happiness, whether in fact they do or do not.[74] Human ethical development brings with it the capacity both for right action and emotional resilience in the face of difficulties and disaster (in Stoic terms, loss of 'preferred indifferents'). Thus, the world as a whole and the working out of events are providentially shaped in the sense that human beings have the in-built natural capacity to make this kind of tough-minded response despite adverse circumstances. It is, perhaps, the linkage between these two ideas that explains why, in thinkers such as Epictetus and Marcus, the theme of the providential working out of events and of resilience in the face of disaster are often linked.[75] However, if so, this linkage depends not just on beliefs about the Stoic worldview but also beliefs about virtue and indifferents and human nature.

What, then, are the conclusions of this review of ancient Stoic thinking for the question, 'how much is enough' to provide a basis for modern life-guidance and the potential benefits of this guidance? I think the conclusions are clear. To judge from the ancient presentation of the basis of the tough-minded response, there are three possible answers to this question. All three answers involve an understanding of the core principles of Stoic ethics outlined earlier. The first answer consists solely of this understanding, as illustrated by Book Five of Cicero's *Tusculans* and other passages. The other two answers, both of which are tenable, combine the understanding of core ethical principles and of human or universal nature. A further, most complete option would include and integrate all three factors. This is, apparently, what Chrysippus advocated.[76] This option would obviously be 'enough' to match ancient Stoic criteria for the highest possible level of ethical understanding, though it would raise the most questions regarding the compatibility between ancient and contemporary thinking about nature. It may be helpful to restate my conclusions in a way that differentiates them from other contemporary responses to Stoicism. On the one hand, the combination of ethical principles and ideas about human, but not universal, nature (Becker's approach) has a firmer basis in ancient Stoic thought than Becker recognized or than is

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[73] See text to n. 17.
[74] See text to nn. 16, 22-3, 32-3. See also Frede 2002, 95-109.
[75] See Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.6.37-43, 2.6.9-10, 3.5.7-11; Marcus, *Meditations* 2.3, 2.17.4-5, 4.49.
[76] See n. 50.

generally recognized by those who follow Becker. On the other hand, the combination of Stoic ethical principles and ideas about universal nature (or both universal nature and human nature) is, when closely examined, more conceptually credible and less remote from contemporary thinking than is often supposed. Also, this combination has the advantage that it opens the way to framing a response to the current environmental crisis that draws on Stoic ideas and thus enlarges our philosophical resources for this objective. Overall, and regardless of whether my conclusions are accepted by other advocates of Stoic life-guidance, I hope this discussion contributes to fuller exploration of the resources of Stoic ethical ideas both for contemporary philosophical reflection and for life-guidance.[77]

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[77] The themes of this discussion are explored much further in a forthcoming book, *Learning to Live Naturally: Stoic Ethics and its Modern Significance*.

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